

## Malay Chess.

BY T. B. ELCUM.

I have seen few things so amusing as a game of chess played in a Malay village, with the whole population of the village standing round, and all of them who possess even the most rudimentary knowledge of the moves, "assisting" their champion with vociferous advice, and abusing his stupidity when he makes a move which for some reason, generally entirely wrong, they think inferior. The rule of "touch and move" is not generally observed among Malays. The spectators frequently will seize upon a piece which has been moved, replace it and make another move, pointing out how superior their method is. Very frequently the suggested improvement is absolutely futile, putting a piece "en prise," or offering an obvious mate to the opponent, but the suggestor is quite unabashed when this is pointed out to him, and the fire of advice and remonstrance goes on until the game is over.

The appliances for these village games are generally of a very primitive character. There will be probably a rough hand-made lot of pieces, perhaps all of one colour, and a hand-made board. The squares of the board are never marked in different colours. Probably some of the men are missing, and various substitutes have to be provided; and sometimes there are no pawns, and their place has to be supplied by little stones, or bits of leaf.

Sometimes the pieces used by Malays bear more or less resemblance to the shapes with which we are familiar, except that the *tir*, the rook, is generally a flat piece like a draughtsman. But more usually they are much less distinctive in shape. The illustrations show a handsome set, gold and brown, kindly lent to me by one of the Johore Royal Family. It will be noticed that the board is uncoloured; the king, queen and pawns are all of the same shape, and distinguished by size only.

The rooks in this set are not of the usual flat description. As a rule the carving of the pieces is very rough, and it is seldom that one sees an elaborate set like that here illustrated. A set often suffices for a village. It is difficult to procure a genuine set of Malay chessmen.

In some parts of the Peninsula very few Malays play chess, in others a large proportion of the inhabitants. On the whole the proportion of men who can play chess more or less is probably greater than with most races. The same game is played in Sumatra as in the Peninsula, and I believe also in Borneo.

How the Malays acquired the game is a mystery. They may have done so from the Arabs, or they may have learnt it directly from natives of India. Neither the peculiar rules of the game, nor the names of pieces and terms used in play throw any light on this point. I give at the end of these notes a list of the words most commonly used in the game, and the languages from which they are derived, as given in Wilkinson's dictionary. The Sanscrit words seem as likely to have come through the Arabs, who learnt the game from India, as direct. Nor do Malay records shed any light on the way in which the game was introduced, so far as I have been able to discover. The most interesting points about the game are the similarities to, and the differences from, the game as now played in Europe, and as formerly played.

The board is 8 by 8 as in European chess, and the men except for the modifications to be pointed out, have the same moves and powers. They are the King (*raja*) the Queen (*mentëri*, minister), two Bishops (*gajah*, elephant), two knights (*kuda*, horse), two Rooks (*tir*, a name which appears to have no other meaning), and 8 pawns (*bidak*, also only the name of this piece).

The first great difference between the Malay game and ours, and one which entirely upsets all book knowledge of the openings which may have been acquired by a student of our game, when he attempts to play the Malay game, is in the arrangements of the pieces. With us king stands opposite king and queen opposite queen. In Malay chess the *mentëri* stands

on the right of his king, and is so opposite to the opposing king.

In the early days of European chess occasional modifications appear to have been made in the position of the pieces at starting, before the game had settled to its present strict form. I have not seen any mention of the Malay method of arranging the men, but we read of games starting with a "tabiyat" or battle array, which seems to have taken many forms, in which the pieces were arranged in positions quite different from the normal starting arrangement and it is probable that the relative positions of king and queen were not always in early days entirely settled.

However that may be, the next variation between Malay chess and ours is certainly a survival of a rule, now dead, which prevailed at one time in Europe.

The Malay king, provided he has not been checked or moved, has the privilege of once leaping like a knight, or of moving over two squares whether another piece intervenes or not, laterally but not forward or diagonally. He can thus practically castle, but in two moves instead of one. Castling as we know it is not a part of the Malay game.

The "king's leap" was recognised in Europe in mediaeval chess before the present method of castling was generally adopted.

The results of this power of the king are very disconcerting to a player unused to the Malay game. Thus an unguarded knight giving check can be taken by the king, or in a crowded position the king skips away from an otherwise fatal check by a knight's move or over another piece. In playing Malay chess at first, it is very common to overlook this curious privilege of the king. The Malays frequently give what would otherwise be an aimless check in order to deprive the king of this power. I have not played the game sufficiently to be sure whether it would be generally advisable to do this between even players—whether the loss of one or two moves involved in giving the check is made up for by the king's loss of his privilege. But it is certainly advisable for a European skilful at his own form of chess, but a novice at Malay chess,

to endeavour to force the king to move only in the way to which he is accustomed, even at the loss of a little time.

A pawn is taken "en passant" at Malay chess, as with us. That a refinement of the game such as this should exist among a primitive race is curious, but it is well established.

The rules of the game mentioned so far contain nothing which might not have been naturally developed from the same form of the game which produced chess as now played in Europe. The curious rules in force among Malays with regard to the promotion of a pawn appear to be peculiar to Malay chess only, and to have no parallel, so far as I can discover, in other forms of chess, ancient or modern.

In Europe any pawn reaching the eighth rank can at once become a queen or any other piece at the option of the player. In Malay chess a rook's pawn, so reaching the 8th rank, may become a mentëri or any other piece immediately, except that it can only become a piece which is off the board; it cannot become a mentëri if the mentëri has not been taken. Should, however, the pawn so advancing to the eighth rank be on any other file, it does not acquire the privilege until it has played back diagonally a sufficient number of moves to enable it to reach the rook's file. Thus a pawn reaching knight's eighth has to play back diagonally one square, on reaching bishop's eighth, two squares, and on king's or queen's eighth, three squares. It is not necessary to actually play the pawn to the rook's file, but it must play back sufficiently far to have reached it. This curious rule makes winning by the odd pawn more difficult than in the European game.

There are other rules which tend to make it easier for the weaker force to draw. The king if left alone on the board must be mated in not more than seven moves or the game is drawn. When the stronger force is barely sufficient to mate, or the position is such as to make it difficult to mate in a few moves, Malay players of the weaker force frequently try to force the capture of these last remaining pawns or pieces, in the hope of escaping defeat by this rule.

Mate cannot be given by a discovered check. It is not good form to exchange queens unless the game can be immediately

won or saved by doing so. A prejudice against the exchange is very common amongst beginners in Europe. There is, of course, no reason for this, but in Malay chess there is some. The rules as to queening a pawn, and as to the lone king make it so difficult to win a pawn ending that it is seldom advisable for the stronger force to clear the board by exchanges.

These rules, which make it easier for the weaker force to draw, are to my mind a weak point in the Malay game, which otherwise is probably equal in essentials to our own. It is certainly a pleasant change to play a game in which no openings have been analysed, and in which the player has to rely entirely on himself from the very beginning of the game.

Malays generally open with a fianchetto to avoid exposing the king to an early check. Whether this is the best method of beginning I cannot say. Few Malays are really strong at the game, though a considerable number play respectably.

The point of most interest with regard to the game is how the special rules which differ from those of other forms of chess, were evolved—whether they are a survival of the form of chess originally taught to the Malays, or whether they have been invented by the Malays themselves.

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### Terms commonly used in Malay Chess.

English	Malay	Derivation according to Wilkinson's Dictionary.
Chess	Chator	Sanskrit (chaturanga)
Chessmen	Buah Chator (Bauh = fruit)	
King	Raja	Sanskrit
Queen	Mentëri (Minister)	Sanskrit
Rook	Tir	
Bishop	Gajah (elephant)	Sanskrit
Knight	Kuda (horse)	
Pawn	Bidak	Arabic
Check	Sah	Persian



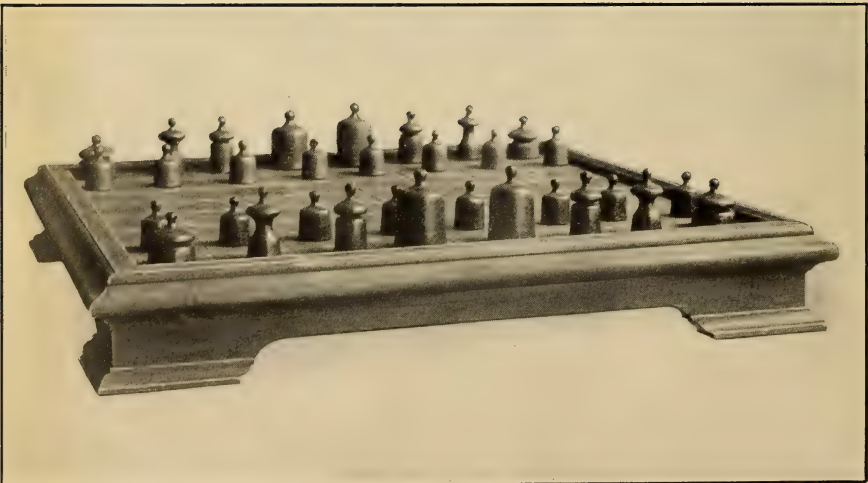
English	Malay	Derivation according to Wilkinson's Dictionary.
Mate	Mat	
Draw	Sĕri	Sanskrit
To take	Makan	
To take "en passant" Makan bidak suap.		

(suap = mouthful or bribe)

The origin of "tir" is doubtful

The words "buah," "kuda," "makan," "suap," are probably pure Malay.

"Mat" apparently comes from the same source as "Sah." If "Sah" is derived from the Persian, so probably is "mat." "Sah Mat" may mean "the king is dead."



MALAY CHESS-BOARD AND MEN.